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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 002288

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/24/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [IN](#)
SUBJECT: DELHI DIARY, AUGUST 18-25

REF: MUMBAI 405

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

Congress-Samajwadi Coordination Committee

¶1. (U) In the wake of the July 22 trust vote in Parliament over the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal in which the Samajwadi Party (SP) lined up squarely with the Congress Party, the two parties announced on August 18 the establishment of a high-powered coordination committee to ensure smooth relations. On the Congress Party's side the committee will consist of its four heavyweights: Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Defense Minister A.K. Anthony. Although the Samajwadi Party has not announced its two delegates to the committee they are expected to be party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav (or his brother Ram Gopal Yadav) and general secretary Amar Singh.

¶2. (C) In an August 8 meeting with the Charge, SP general secretary Amar Singh had hinted at the first two items to be taken up by the joint committee: agreement on allocating parliamentary seats for the upcoming national elections; and SP representation in the cabinet should the SP decide to join the government. The high level composition of the committee is also something that Amar Singh was insistent on, telling the Charge that he would not negotiate on these two issues with Congress Party underlings who had no authority to make decisions.

Government Pushes for Ban on SIMI

¶3. (U) Following the August 17 arrests of ten Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) activists in connection with the July Ahmedabad blasts (reftel), the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) central government filed a fresh affidavit with the Supreme Court August 20 to strengthen its case seeking to continue the ban on the Islamic organization. In the affidavit, UPA cited confessional statements collected by the Gujarat government detailing SIMI initiatives to mobilize Muslim youth to spread extremist ideology throughout India. The UPA warned that "public order

will suffer" if the organization is not banned.

14. (U) On August 6, The Indian Supreme Court had issued a stay order putting on hold the August 5 Delhi High Court ruling that had lifted the ban on SIMI. The UPA government's failure to get a favorable ruling from the Delhi High Court had come in for loud criticism from the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party as well as the domestic press. The case comes up for hearing in the Supreme Court the week of August 25.

Left Parties Call Nationwide Strike

15. (U) Eager to attack their erstwhile allies after their following out over the U.S.-India civil nuclear deal, the Left political parties called a nationwide strike on August 20 to protest government inaction on equitable pay and inflations. The strike impacted Indian business -- including banking, insurance, aviation, railways, and other government sectors -- particularly in Left-ruled states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura. Eight trade unions have had raised the demand for higher pay and a more aggressive government response to rising inflation. Among the striking unions were the powerful All India Trade Union Conference (AITUC) and Center for Industrial Trade Unions (CITU).

16. (U) According to media reports, the strike most affected normal life in West Bengal and Kerala. Employees shut down operations at the Kolkata international airport, which led to

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cancellation of more than 300 flights. Meanwhile, government offices and educational institutions remain closed in Kerala since August 20. Protesters have also blocked major road and railways corridors, halting public transportation in the state.

Shia Woman Breaks Tradition, Officiates Marriage

17. (U) On August 13, Sayida Hamid, noted Islamic scholar, broke with tradition and performed a nikah (marriage ceremony) in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. The occasion marked the first time in India a woman solemnized a Muslim marriage. The fact that Hamid is a Shia while the marrying couple is Sunni made the event even more significant. The bride, Naish Hasan, opted for a female to officiate at the ceremony in order to protest male-dominated Muslim tradition. She declared, "this is a message I want to send across to young girls and a protest I want to launch against the subjugation of women." Groom Imran Ali asserted that the use of a female to oversee the marriage "helped me put my belief in gender equality into practice."

18. (U) Five months earlier, the All India Muslim Women Personal Law Board revised the marriage contract law to expand rights for women. The board argued that its version of the marriage contract would promote stability and security in Muslim marriages and make husbands more accountable. The new guidelines also grant wives protection against the triple talaq (divorce by repeating the word "talaq" three times). Zaheer Mustafa, Editor of Aftab-e-Alam and In Dinon Urdu, observed that "this (nikah) is a welcome move which will upset the traditional applecart of male-chauvinistic practices of mullahs. The hard-line clergy do not relish this, but what can they do when the Quran and Hadis have not barred a female Qazi (judge) from solemnizing a nikah?" Zafar Agha, a liberal Muslim journalist, commented "this historic Lucknow nikah speaks volumes on fundamentalist elements being so openly challenged by the community."

19. (U) Comment: The Lucknow marriage is a victory for the liberal sections of India's Muslim community. While liberals still must overcome the traditional mindset of their conservative counterparts, the new law provides a basis to

challenge male-dominated norms.
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